

In the United States Court of Federal Claims
OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS
No. 22-0596V

MEGAN HARTZ,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Chief Special Master Corcoran

Filed: January 30, 2025

*Catherine Wallace Costigan, Maglio Christopher & Toale, PA, Washington, DC, for
Petitioner.*

Julianna Rose Kober, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for Respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEY'S FEES AND COSTS¹

On May 31, 2022, Megan Hartz filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10, *et seq.*² (the “Vaccine Act”). Petitioner alleges that she suffered a Table injury – a shoulder injury related to vaccine administration (“SIRVA”) - as a result of her receipt of the flu vaccine on October 5, 2020. Petition at 1, 4. On September 20, 2024, I issued a decision awarding damages following briefing and expedited Motions Day argument by the parties. ECF No. 44.

¹ Because this Decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action taken in this case, it must be made publicly accessible and will be posted on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website, and/or at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/uscourts/national/cofc>, in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2018) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). **This means the Decision will be available to anyone with access to the internet.** In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), Petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, I agree that the identified material fits within this definition, I will redact such material from public access.

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all section references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2018).

Petitioner has now filed a motion for attorney's fees and costs, requesting an award of \$50,026.91 (representing \$49,105.50 for fees and \$921.41 for costs). Petitioner's Application for Fees and Costs filed Oct. 29, 2024, ECF No. 51. In accordance with General Order No. 9, Petitioner filed a signed statement indicating that she incurred no out-of-pocket expenses. ECF No. 51-4.

Respondent reacted to the motion on October 31, 2024, representing that he is satisfied that the statutory requirements for an award of attorney's fees and costs are met in this case, but deferring resolution of the amount to be awarded to my discretion. Respondent's Response to Motion at 2-3, 3 n.2, ECF No. 52. The same day, Petitioner filed a reply, reiterating her fees request. ECF No. 53.

Having considered the motion along with the invoices and other proof filed in connection, I find reductions in the amount of fees and costs to be awarded appropriate, for the reasons set forth below.

ANALYSIS

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs. Section 15(e). Counsel must submit fee requests that include contemporaneous and specific billing records indicating the service performed, the number of hours expended on the service, and the name of the person performing the service. See *Savin v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 316-18 (2008). Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993) (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)). It is "well within the special master's discretion to reduce the hours to a number that, in [her] experience and judgment, [is] reasonable for the work done." *Id.* at 1522. Furthermore, the special master may reduce a fee request *sua sponte*, apart from objections raised by respondent and without providing a petitioner notice and opportunity to respond. See *Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 209 (2009). A special master need not engage in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner's fee application when reducing fees. *Broekelschen v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 729 (2011).

The petitioner "bears the burden of establishing the hours expended, the rates charged, and the expenses incurred." *Wasson v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. 482, 484 (1991). The Petitioner "should present adequate proof [of the attorney's fees and costs sought] at the time of the submission." *Wasson*, 24 Cl. Ct. at 484 n.1. Petitioner's counsel "should make a good faith effort to exclude from a fee request hours

that are excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary, just as a lawyer in private practice ethically is obligated to exclude such hours from his fee submission.” *Hensley*, 461 U.S. at 434.

ATTORNEY FEES

The rates requested for work performed through the end of 2024 are reasonable and consistent with our prior determinations, and will therefore be adopted. However, a few of the tasks performed by Ms. Costigan and Elizabeth Abramson (an associate at the firm) are more properly billed using a paralegal rate.³ “Tasks that can be completed by a paralegal or a legal assistant should not be billed at an attorney’s rate.” *Riggins v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 99-382V, 2009 WL 3319818, at *21 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. June 15, 2009). “[T]he rate at which such work is compensated turns not on who ultimately performed the task but instead turns on the nature of the task performed.” *Doe/11 v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. XX-XXXXV, 2010 WL 529425, at *9 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jan. 29, 2010). **This reduces the amount of fees to be awarded by \$114.80.**⁴

Regarding the number of hours billed, I deem the *total* amount of time devoted to briefing damages to be excessive – although not egregiously so. See Status Report, filed Oct. 17, 2023, ECF No. 34 (reporting an impasse in the parties’ damages discussions); Petitioner’s Memorandum in Support of Motion for Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law Regarding Damages, filed Oct. 17, 2023, ECF No. 35; Petitioner’s Response to Respondent’s Brief on Damages, filed Dec. 11, 2023, ECF No. 40; Minute Entry, dated Sept. 18, 2024 (for Sept. 18, 2024 expedited hearing). Petitioner’s counsel expended approximately 12.2 hours drafting the damages brief and 17.9 hours drafting the reply damages brief, for a combined total of 30.1.⁵

³ These entries, drafting basic documents such as an exhibit list, notice of filings, statement of completion, joint notice not to seek review, and election to accept judgment are dated as follows: 6/1/22, 1/26/23, 4/27/23, 5/8/23, 8/30/23, 10/25/23, and 9/18/24 (only 0.1 hours of this time). ECF No. 51-2 at 10, 13-17, 19.

⁴ This amount consists of $(\$250 - \$177) \times 0.2 \text{ hrs.} + (\$295 - \$186) \times 0.4 \text{ hrs.} + (\$370 - \$186) \times 0.02 \text{ hrs.} + (\$395 - \$197) \times 0.1 \text{ hrs.} = \114.80 .

⁵ This total is calculated as follows: 30.1 hours billed on 10/9/23 (two entries), 10/10/23, 10/13/23, 10/17/23 (two entries), 12/4/23 (two entries), 12/5/23, 12/6/23 (two entries), 12/7/23, and 12/11/23 (four entries), by Catherine Costigan at a rate of \$370. ECF No. 51-2 at 17-18

My above calculation does not include time spent preparing the initial demand which would have informed this later work, and I am therefore awarding fees associated with that task in full. See, e.g., ECF No. 51-2 at 15 (entry dated 4/27/23). Nor am I counting time spent preparing for and participating in Motions Day, communicating with Petitioner, and preparing additional supporting documentation such as affidavits or signed declarations, which is also being awarded in full. See, e.g., *id.* at 17 (entry dated 10/9/23), 18 (entry dated 9/17/24).

It is unreasonable for counsel to spend so much time briefing the issue of damages in this case, where the issues presented are not complex. I have identified numerous cases (which may reasonably be compared to time spent in this matter),⁶ in which attorneys have accomplished this task in about half the time.⁷

⁶ Special masters may use comparisons to attorneys performing similar tasks to determine if hours are excessive. See *Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1518-1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993).

⁷ See, e.g., *Wirges v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-1670V (Dec. 27, 2024) (16.8 and 7.5 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Tracy v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1312V (Dec. 27, 2024) (12.5 and 5.1 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Tappendorf v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1592V (Dec. 27, 2024) (14.1 and 7.9 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Stolze v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0964V (Nov. 22, 2024) (11.8 and 7.2 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Davidson v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1617V (Nov. 22, 2024) (14.9 and 3.8 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *M.F. v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0970V (Nov. Apr. 9, 2024) (13 and 7.8 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Axelrod v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0980V (Mar. 29, 2024) (11.9 and 12.5 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Benz v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-1197V (Mar. 26, 2024) (19.5 and 6.6 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Hansler-Point v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0045V (Mar. 26, 2024) (9.6 and 4.9 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Dulaney v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1488V (Mar. 26, 2024) (6.6 and 0.5 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Glanville v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-1973V (Mar. 26, 2024) (8.7 hours billed for drafting a damages brief); *Stokes v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-0752V (Feb. 29, 2024) (15.3 and 8.1 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Richardson v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0674V (Feb. 9, 2024) (9.2 and 6.3 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Edwards v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0056V (Feb. 5, 2024) (11.3 and 7.2 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Villa v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0569V (Feb. 5, 2024) (6.0 and 5.6 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Jackson v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0051V (Feb. 5, 2024) (15.4 and 7.7 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Mulloy v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-1396V (Nov. 6, 2023) (19.7 and 9.5 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Gao v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-1884V (Oct. 25, 2023) (16.5 and 9.4 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Knasel v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1366V (Oct. 25, 2023) (11.5 and 13.6 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Langdon v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1311V (Oct. 25, 2023) (12.5 and 12.8 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Mantagas v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-

Of course, having prevailed in this case, a fees award is generally appropriate. Damages Decision, issued Sept. 20, 2024, ECF No. 44. However, the only disputed issues were related to past pain and suffering and the appropriate rate to be used when reimbursing mileage. *Id.* at 2. The parties' proposed amounts differed by only \$43,500.00 (with Petitioner arguing for \$80,000.00 and Respondent arguing for \$37,500). And I awarded an amount much closer to that advocated by Respondent - further underscoring the extent to which Petitioner's efforts in this behalf had a futile quality (since I ultimately found the higher figure was not adequately defended). *Id.*

The Act permits only an award of a *reasonable amount* of attorney's fees. Accordingly, I will reduce the sum to be awarded for entitlement damages briefing (**a total of 30.1 hours, or \$11,137.00**) by *ten percent*.⁸ Such an across-the-board reduction (which I am empowered to adopt)⁹ fairly captures the overbilling evidenced by this work, without requiring me to act as a "green eye-shaded accountant" in identifying with specificity each objectionable task relevant to this one sub-area of work performed on the

1720V (Oct. 17, 2023) (6.7 and 4.2 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Majerus v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1346V (Oct. 17, 2023) (11.0 and 4.6 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Cosden v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1783 (Aug. 8, 2023) (6.3 hours billed for drafting a damages brief); *Balch v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0872V (June 30, 2023) (18.7 hours billed for drafting a damages brief); *Kestner v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0025V (June 22, 2023) (6.00 and 4.10 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Juno v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 18-0643V (June 14, 2023) (5.8 hours billed for drafting a damages brief); *Deutsch v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 18-0527V (June 12, 2023) (7.4 and 4.4 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Edminister v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-0184V (May 30, 2023) (15.3 and 3.5 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Aponte v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1031V (May 18, 2023) (6.9 hours billed for drafting a damages brief); *Gray v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1708V (May 18, 2023) (5 hours billed for drafting a damages brief); *Horky v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0239V (May 18, 2023) (5.8 hours billed for drafting a damages brief); *Thomson v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 22-0234V (May 18, 2023) (9.5 and 2.5 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively); *Rice-Hansen v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1338V (May 17, 2023) (12.9 and 6.1 hours billed for drafting a damages brief and responsive damages brief, respectively). These decisions can (or will) be found on the United States Court of Federal Claims website, and/or at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/uscourts/national/cofc> (last visited Dec. 7, 2024).

⁸ Because the amount of excessive hours was not as egregious as in previous cases, I will reduce the hours billed by a lower amount than I otherwise would apply. See, e.g., *Callejas v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1767V, 2023 WL 9288086 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Oct. 24, 2023).

⁹ Special masters are permitted to employ percentage reductions to hours billed, provided the reduction is sufficiently explained. See, e.g., *Abbott v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 135 Fed. Cl. 107, 111 (2017); *Raymo v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 129 Fed. Cl. 691, 702-704 (2016); *Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 214 (2009).

case. This results in a reduction of \$1,113.70.¹⁰

ATTORNEY COSTS

Petitioner requests \$921.41 in overall costs and has provided receipts for all expenses. ECF No. 51-3. I have reviewed the requested costs and find them to be reasonable. And Respondent offered no specific objection to the rates or amounts sought.

CONCLUSION

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs for successful claimants. Section 15(e). Accordingly, I hereby GRANT Petitioner's Motion for attorney's fees and costs. I award a total of **\$48,798.41 (representing \$47,877.00 for fees and \$921.41 in costs) to be paid through an ACH deposit to Petitioner's counsel's IOLTA account for prompt disbursement.** In the absence of a timely-filed motion for review (see Appendix B to the Rules of the Court), the Clerk of Court shall enter judgment in accordance with this Decision.¹¹

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Brian H. Corcoran

Brian H. Corcoran

Chief Special Master

¹⁰ This amount is calculated as follows: 30.1 hrs. x \$370 x .10 = \$1,113.70.

¹¹ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), the parties may expedite entry of judgment by filing a joint notice renouncing their right to seek review.